Interview with George G. Higgins

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project Labor Series

MONSIGNOR GEORGE G. HIGGINS

Interviewer: Morris Weisz

Initial interview date: November 3, 1994

Q: Today is November 3, 1994. I'm sitting in the office of Monsignor George Higgins, an old friend, in Curley Hall at Catholic University. We are going to go over the work he has done over the past 45 years that I know of, but even longer than that; how he came into the international field and his interest in it; and his observations on a number of subjects which we will be discussing.

Won't you begin by giving a little bit about your family background so we know where you came from, and a reference, if you don't mind, to the book in which some interesting details of your early life are already given in the first, very interesting, autobiographical chapter.

HIGGINS: I am a native of Chicago. I came to Catholic University after I was ordained a priest to study labor economics, and then stayed on — and I'm still here.

Some of the background, which is of no great interest here, is in the book that you referred to, Organized Labor and the Church, published by the Paulist Press in Mahwah, New Jersey, which gives just “a once over lightly” of my early experience. But before we get into any details, I would like to say that my involvement in the international field was very

limited. It was not, by any means, a full-time exercise with me. I can tell you how I first got interested in it and then go on from there.

You recall, I'm sure, that under the military government in Germany, there was a section on religious affairs and they used to bring people over from the United States, on three or four month tours. I was one of those who was asked to come over to do a report on the relationship between the Church in Germany and the German trade union movement. At that time, everyone was concerned about whether or not the Germans would be able to combine the trade union movements into one, unified movement. I spent three or four months in Germany at that time and eventually put out a report, which I don't have anymore. I have a copy in the Archives.

Q: When you say the Archives, you mean, which?

HIGGINS: At Catholic University.

Q: Right.

HIGGINS: But as a result of going to Germany on that assignment, I had some free time. I could travel in between my chores on the assignment, and I moved around Europe a bit. I went to the ILO (International Labor Organization) and visited as many labor people as I could meet. That's how I first got interested in it. It was rather by happenstance. If I had not gone to Germany on that assignment, the chances are I would have done very little in the international field, because my job here in Washington was on domestic affairs. But, because of that experience, then whenever I went to Europe after that, which was rather frequently in those days, I would stop by to see the Labor Attach#s and see the people in the labor movement that I knew or could get in contact with. It was a sort of an informal, unorganized involvement that I had. I never had an assignment from my own organization to do international work. I just did it on my own, as a result of that trip to Germany. That's how it began.

Q: Tell us the circumstances of your getting this assignment to spend some time in Germany.

HIGGINS: There was a priest on the staff of the Conference who, for reasons that I don't recall. .

Q: When you say the Conference, you mean the. . . ?

HIGGINS: The National Catholic Welfare Conference in those days, now called the United States Catholic Conference. There was a priest on the staff who, for reasons that I don't recall, had contact with this Religious Affairs Office [of the U.S. Military Government in Germany], and they used him as the intermediary in suggesting people who might be invited to come over. I remember John Courtney Murray was invited over to do a report on Church-State Relations; someone else went over on Education. There were a number of people. This priest, who was a friend of mine, nominated me to go over and do this report on the Church and labor.

Q: Could you put a date to that? 1948? 1949?

HIGGINS: 1949, I think.

Q: 1949.

HIGGINS: My memory on dates is very bad, but it was 1949, I think.

Q: Right.

HIGGINS: I had no contact myself with anybody in the U.S. Government. This was done through this priest on the staff who, for his own reasons, had contact and was asked to be the intermediary in getting people to go over. There were many divisions in the military government, and I'm sure there were dozens of people doing the same thing. This was only in religious affairs. I don't recall the names of most of the people I worked with in

Germany at the time. The man in charge of the particular office I dealt with is dead, I think. His name was Arild Olson, a native of Iowa. I believe he had been a minister, but I'm not sure. I don't remember the other names. I had a free-wheeling assignment — just go out around Germany. They gave me a driver and a military car. I could go anywhere I wanted and talk to anybody I wanted about that one specific subject, the Church and labor. So, I met with individual priests and organizations and a few bishops.

Q: Not with the labor people?

HIGGINS: Oh, yes.

Q: Oh, yes.

HIGGINS: With the labor people, sure.

Q: No, I mean the labor people in the military government.

HIGGINS: Not that I recall.

Q: Right.

HIGGINS: I could have, but I'm very hazy on that. I don't recall having any specific dealings with that section, but I may have. I could be wrong on that. As I say, the only copy of the report that I have is over in my own papers in the Catholic University Archives, and I haven't looked at it in years. My general recollection is that I came down rather optimistically expressing the hope that there would be a united [labor] movement.

I felt, at the time, that some people in the U.S. Government, and perhaps some in the labor movement, leaned too far to the Socialist side and didn't quite understand where the old Christian trade unions were coming from. That was a cultural problem, because Americans had no experience with that kind of trade unionism. But I ran into no difficulties in that regard. My own conclusion was that it would be good for Germany if they could have a

united movement and, of course, they do now. And they did shortly thereafter. That issue has never risen again, as far as I know, in Germany.

Q: Your report is in the Archives.

HIGGINS: Of the Catholic University.

Q: Under your name?

HIGGINS: My name, yes.

Q: Right.

HIGGINS: All my papers — good, bad and indifferent — are in the Archives here. I have never looked at them. They are fairly well catalogued, I think, not down to specifics, but the general categories are well-catalogued.

Q: Open to students?

HIGGINS: Oh, sure. They are open to anybody. I have no restrictions on the papers at all. But that's how I got started. I never thought I would be going to Europe, but once I was there, I took advantage of it. I had an opportunity to travel, and I did travel a good bit during that four month period. It was the first time I ever visited the ILO.

I can tell you one story on this cultural difference between the old Christian unions and the Socialist unions. I was traveling, in my spare time, with an American priest friend of mine, who happened to be studying in Europe. We joined together and decided to do a little traveling. We went to the ILO. This priest had done a year's internship with the AFL-CIO, so he was known to George Meany and the rest of the crowd. We stayed in the same hotel in Geneva with Meany and Mrs. Meany. We ran into them in the lobby one afternoon. Since Meany knew this man, and he knew me, he said, “What are you doing for dinner, tonight?” [I replied,] “Nothing.” Well, he said, “My wife and I are going to a dinner

sponsored by the Swiss Labor Movement. Why don't you come along?" [My friend said,] "Fine. We'll meet you in the lobby at 6:30." About six o'clock, we got a call [from Meany] in our room. "A little mix up," he said, "The Swiss labor movement said it doesn't think it would be appropriate to have a priest, or two priests, come to their dinner."

Q: With or without an invocation..

HIGGINS: Yes, with or without an invitation. It was not done.

Q: I said, with or without an invocation.

HIGGINS: Yes. It just wasn't done. I can give you another story related to that, but it has nothing to do with my own involvement in Europe. You remember the name of Gaston Tessier?

Q: Oh, yes.

HIGGINS: A very devout Catholic.

Q: We have to interrupt these things to say who he was.

HIGGINS: Tessier was President of the French Christian Trade Union Movement.

Q: Right.

HIGGINS: A very devout, old-line Catholic. He came to the United States — I was not present — he came to an ILO meeting in San Francisco. There was a French-speaking American priest in San Francisco, who had studied here, in my time, at Catholic U. His mother was French and he spoke French fluently. So, they seated him next to Tessier at the dinner. This priest was then asked to give the invocation, and Tessier was astounded, not to say shocked, that there would be an invocation at a meeting of that kind in the United States. He said that would never happen in France. Tessier as much as said, "We

wouldn't permit it to happen in France." It just wasn't done. So, he couldn't quite see how in the world a trade union movement — This was sponsored by the local trade unions in San Francisco — would have a clergyman come in to give an invocation.

But the Meany incident with the Swiss trade union movement was quite revealing. It would have been embarrassing to them to have a clergyman come in. It was somewhat embarrassing to Meany, but it didn't bother us, because we went out to dinner some place else. But I cite that as only one little example.

Another example comes to my mind of how things have changed. While I was in Europe, I went to Holland, briefly, just to look around. At that time, as you may recall, Holland was completely ghetto-ized. The Socialists had their own papers. The Catholics had their own papers, even their own radio stations. The Protestants had their own papers. The Communists had their own papers. And they all had separate unions. It was a matter almost of excommunication for a Catholic to belong to anything except a Catholic trade union movement. I had, at one time, the document in which that was laid out. I lost it unfortunately, and I've never been able to find another copy. But, I do recall that it was signed by all the bishops of Holland, including one by the name of Bernard Alfrink, who was a very young bishop, probably an auxiliary. I found out, later, when I went to the Vatican Council that Alfrink was one of the great liberals in the council, and today, of course, the ghetto-ized culture of Holland is completely gone, absolutely completely gone. There are no more Catholic organizations of any kind. All of that structured ghetto-ization is completely broken down. I would think that of all the countries in Europe, maybe of all the countries in the world, the breakdown in the ghetto-ized Catholic culture has gone the furthest in Holland, whereas it was the tightest in those days. That's how fast things have changed.

The only thing I could compare it with would be French Canada. The first time I went to French Canada, the so-called Christian trade unions there were very conservative. They were very clerical — I think they all had a chaplain. — and completely separated from

the other unions in Canada. Today that's all gone. The former so-called Christian unions, former Christian Trade Unions of French Canada, as far as I can see, are now the most radical of all the unions. The influence of the Church is gone. There is no such thing as a chaplain. They wouldn't allow a chaplain to get anywhere near them. The same kind of cultural transformation [has occurred] in French Canada that took place in Holland, where you had a kind of in-bred ghetto-ized church, aggravated by the fact that it was still highly agricultural [with lots of] small towns. That's all gone. And of the two places that I know in the world, the most rapid cultural change in the Church since the Second Vatican Council involving also the labor movement are in those two [places] — Holland and French Canada. I cite them, [even though] they have nothing to do with your question, because they are examples of how things have changed.

As far as Germany is concerned, I went back to Germany a few times after that, just on holiday or vacation, and met a number of the trade union leaders. As far as I could see the Einheitsgewerkshaft [unified trade union] was working out well and I hear nothing about it anymore. There's still a division between the parties in Germany — There's the Christian Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Party. — but I don't think it flows over into the trade union field. At least I've never heard that it has. But that was my original involvement.

Q: Now, what I would appreciate and what I think our project would be very interested in is the sequence of events within the Church and, as far as you can comment on it, outside the Church which led to the almost secularization of the Catholic trade union movement from the point of view of these ICFTU-oriented unions. Those of us serving for the [U.S.] Government saw a change gradually take place, partly because of their attitude towards capitalism and partly because of the developments that you have seen.

HIGGINS: Well, the most radical change, of course, came long after the period we're talking about. It came with the Second Vatican Council. That was the major turning point in the history of Catholicism in the last hundred or two hundred years. It was a very radical change.

Q: This would have been about when?

HIGGINS: 1962 to 1965.

Q: And you spent, by the way, the whole time there?

HIGGINS: I was there for that, yes. There were four sessions, [one] every fall — 1962, 1963, 1964 and 1965. [The Council] ended in 1965 and developed 16 or 18 major documents. The total impact of the Council, not only of the documents themselves, but of the event itself, was a major, major change in the history of world Catholicism. There have been dozens and dozens of books written on that, but that came after the period we were talking about, when I was in Germany.

The changes before the Council that might have led up to it, I would be hard to put to trace them back to their origins. Part of change, I think, had something to do with the war — the realization on the part of everyone that they could not go back to what they had before the Second World War, and that if there had been a united labor movement under Hitler, they might have done better. I think that was in the back of the minds of some people. [There was] a general realization that everybody was involved now in a new world. They had to take a new look at everything, because we had gone through this terrible war and gone through the Holocaust and everything that went with that. I think that had some bearing on it. But, it took time. I don't recall, when I was in Germany, that there was any bitter feeling between the groups. There were differences, of course. There was some resentment on the part of some of the Catholics in the Christian trade union movement that the Socialists had a kind of imperial attitude, that they were the dominant movement and “tough luck for you fellows, you're not involved in it.” [There was] also, I won't say resentment, but some bewilderment that the Americans, when they came to Europe, didn't understand the situation at all, because it wasn't in their experience. We had never had sectarian unions in the United States, so that it was not uncommon for American trade unionists to come over and rather absent-mindedly almost take the side of the Socialists, because they were

the dominant union. “What is this business of sectarianism?” They didn't understand it at all. They had no cultural or historical memory to go on. That was very common. There was some resentment on the part of some of the people that I recall talking to in those days.

But, as I said, my major conclusion was that it would be better for everybody concerned if they could have a united movement and I was fairly optimistic that they would. They do now, of course, and have had for some time. But you asked me to trace the origins of that?.

Q: Right.

HIGGINS: I don't think there was anything in church documents that did it. There was no major change, say, between 1930 and 1949, in Church documents that made that more possible. It was more, I think, the culture of the times. The official church documents, the last one before 1949 was in 1931, Quadragesimo Anno. That was still rather tough on socialism. There was no break-through, there. So, it didn't come out of official documents. I think it came out of the experience of people, and I can't help but think that the war had a lot to do with it. They had suffered together in the war; they had seen, I think, that it didn't make any sense to be divided, if you were going to have an enemy like Hitler. The general mood of the time, I think, was “Let's see if we can't work together for the good of the country and this new world we're going into.” But, beyond that, I would have to go back and meditate for hours to try to figure out what the reasons were. It's very clear after 1962, after the Council, that is easy to measure, because the changes of the Council were so dramatic, that there's no question that that had a major, major impact. But the uniting of the labor movement in Germany came along before that, of course.

Q: And the continued separation in other countries. I'm going to ask you, later on, about the degree to which you had comments on France, Italy and other countries, from traveling there because the separation continued in these other countries.

The personality of John the XXIII. . . ?

HIGGINS: Well, that was much after our period. See, he didn't become the Pope until the late 1950s.

Q: Yes. Well, I'm saying, did his personality affect the creation of Vatican II?

HIGGINS: Oh, of course.

Q: That's the point.

HIGGINS: It would have been impossible without him, and he put his stamp on it, in a very indirect way. He never interfered in the Council or seldom interfered with it. He was seldom in the Council. They say that he observed it on TV. I don't know whether he did or not. But he was very light-handed. His opinion was, “It's time to get the bishops of the world together and let them talk and let them get to know one another. The more freedom the better.” So he allowed almost unlimited freedom in the Council, even though, as the President, he could have exercised control, if he wanted to. But he exercised very little control. He clearly left the impression, by his personality and by his whole mode of operation, that he wanted freedom. When he intervened, it was usually on the side of freedom. Occasionally he would intervene to make sure that what he thought was a legitimate point of view was getting a fair hearing. There's no doubt he had enormous influence. But, of course, he died after the first session, and the Council then went on without him. So, it wasn't only the Pope [that made the Council successful, but also the work done within] the Council itself.

I've had a very clear impression — It has nothing to do with our specific subject, but I've said this many times to other people. — that what made the Council a success was it lasted four years. It took four years, well, four sessions, and many sessions in between, of course, with committees. It took a long time for 3,000 or 2,500 bishops from all the cultures of the world to develop their own dynamics. If that Council had lasted only one session,

I think it would have been a failure, and we wouldn't be talking about it today. It would have been just a passing event, forgotten by now. But it developed its own inner dynamics because for four years, bishops from all over the world — and there were theologians and other advisors — built up their own understanding of the dynamics of this organization. Very important, I think.

Q: Yes, I saw that you covered that in the book.

HIGGINS: Yes, I think it's very important.

Q: But as for the final documents of Vatican II, what were the origin and the sort of decisions with respect to labor, and how did they affect individual countries, so far as you know?

HIGGINS: There was very little specifically on labor. The major document that touches upon our field was the one on The Church and the Modern World. The first part of that document is philosophical and religious; the second part applies it to the family, to economics, to politics, etcetera. The section on economics is not startlingly new. The only specific reference that I recall to labor is a strong insistence on the freedom of trade unions, [i.e.,] free from government control. There was some feeling on the part of a few of the consultants and delegates to go easy on Spain, but they went the opposite way. There's a very strong statement that unions should be free and independent, but there was no extended treatment of unions. But it was the general atmosphere that affected it, not the specifics — the opening to the world, the need for dialogue and inter-religious cooperation, which was a very marked change in the Church. All of those things added up to more than the specific statements. You won't find anything startlingly new in the document about labor or about any other specific question, but you'll find a lot that's startlingly new in the total atmosphere.

Q: How were you selected to be going to Rome?

HIGGINS: Well, they had a number of people, dozens and dozens of people, who were so-called periti experts or consultants. How I was chosen, I'm not sure.

Q: What did you say, piredial?

HIGGINS: Well, the Latin word, periti. It means experts.

Q: P-A?

HIGGINS: P-E-R-I-T-I. That means consultants or experts.

Q: Right.

HIGGINS: There were many, many theologians and others, some of them much more influential than others. I had no great influence on the Council. But there were some distinguished theologians who had enormous influence in drafting documents.

Q: Any lay people involved?

HIGGINS: Yes. Oh, yes. Not too many. Not as many as there should have been, but there were, men and women. But I would think if we had another Council in five years from now, ten years from now, twenty, there would be many more lay people. It would be a Council brought up to date. But I don't know how I was selected. Some friend of mine in Rome probably put my name in, but I really don't know. I was there not only for the four sessions of the Council but for the two years preceding it, the so-called preparatory stages when commissions were meeting. So to me, it was the greatest experience of my life. Nothing is even comparable to it, because it was the greatest single event in the history of the Church in the last hundred, two hundred years, without any question — maybe in the last five hundred years.

Q: I hope we can go into the impact of those revolutionary events on the individual countries and how the Church, in the labor field at least, interpreted or misinterpreted what came out of the Vatican II in individual countries in which activities were so different.

HIGGINS: Well, I wouldn't be able to say very much about that, because I don't know that much about the individual countries. I've cited the case of Holland. That's a very clear example of where the Council resulted — and they have gone from one extreme to the other — in a complete breakdown of the former cultural structures of the country, complete.

So today anyone who would suggest a Christian trade union in Holland would probably be laughed at. Whereas, before the Council, it was almost a matter of excommunication for a Catholic to belong to any union that wasn't a Catholic union, and, as far as I can see from reading about Holland, you read a Catholic newspaper, you went to a Catholic doctor, . . .

Q: Had a Catholic sports organization.

HIGGINS: And the socialists did the same thing.

Q: Absolutely.

HIGGINS: It was just completely structured. That is completely gone.

Q: Do you have any explanation as to why that is completely gone in a country like Holland and yet the remnants of it remain in a country like Austria?

HIGGINS: No, I really don't. That would take a cultural anthropologist and historian.

Q: Right. I'd like to get your observations. I think, I don't know, I think you're guilty of a little bit too much modesty because in your book, you discuss observing Latin America, for instance. I've been encouraged by one of the members of the advisory committee to our project, Ben Martin, to get you to discuss what you observed and how you explain the

difference in attitude in Latin America, which you did in your book. You do discuss Church activities. Now, they may not have been Church activities but the activities of individual groups within the churches in Latin America and Spain and Portugal.

HIGGINS: I honestly don't recall what I said specifically on that in the book. I'd have to go back and check it. But, there's been a tremendous change in Latin America through liberation theology, of course, and that came after the Council. Before the Council, there was none of that. The changes in the labor movement probably have not been all that radical. You still have something that's remotely called a Christian Trade Union Federation, quite separate from the Church as an institution. [It is] still somewhat at odds with ORIT and the older unions, and again, in my haphazard dealings with people in Latin America, just occasional dealings, you sense some of that same, I won't say resentment, but somewhat sense of bewilderment, that Americans don't understand what the differences are between the two organizations. [Americans] tend automatically to think that since the AFL-CIO is in ORIT, that therefore there's something wrong about. . .any union which [describes] itself as having some Christian inspiration.

I remember bringing some of the CLAT people to Washington ten years ago, now.

Q: CLAT people. We have to [explain that term].

HIGGINS: Yes, CLAT is the Christian Federation of unions in Latin America. I haven't had much to do with them recently, but about ten years ago, I sponsored a dinner meeting at a club downtown between several CLAT representatives and several representatives of the AFL-CIO. I invited some other guests. Once we had finished dinner, they said, “We're leaving. This is a private meeting now between CLAT and the AFL-CIO.” I never did hear, in detail, what came out of it except that it was a friendly meeting and that there have been, since then, a number of contacts. But I haven't heard anything in the last five years. I would say there was no great love lost between CLAT and Bill Doherty, for example,

of AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development). They are just in two different worlds.

On the general question of Latin America, the changes came from the Council. There was a brand new involvement of the Church. It goes under the general heading of “liberation theology,” which means different things to different people. It was a conscious decision on the part of at least some Church leaders to reverse history, which had involved the Church too often in the past with the upper class, sometimes with dictatorial governments, to go to the poor. That's an oversimplification of what liberation theology is, but that came out of the council.

Q: But in going to the poor, why did that involve, also, attributing to the other trade unions, sort of ICFTU-oriented ORIT trade unions, attributing them being overly pro-capitalist?

HIGGINS: Well, that's the Latin American culture. Capitalism, to them, has a bad ring.

Q: American imperialism.

HIGGINS: And a bad ring, of course. Not all of them, but to many. I think they're getting over it, to some extent. I'll give you an example. When the American bishops issued their Pastoral letter on the economy in 1986, it was severely criticized by neo-conservatives in this country, especially Michael Novak and that crowd, but it was also criticized severely by the left wing of the Liberation Movement, because it didn't attack capitalism. Well, that was never its purpose. Its purpose was to talk about the American economy, not to write a philosophical dissertation about capitalism versus socialism.

Q: Or democracy versus. . .

HIGGINS: Yes. I've found the criticism from the left wing of the Liberation Movement very superficial. I don't think they understood American capitalism, and they never made it clear what they meant by socialism. Some of the Liberation theologians who had

advocated socialism, well, what does it mean? Then along came the fall of communism in Europe, and they were really left high and dry. One of them, who has since left the priestly ministry and is one of the leading spokesmen for the left wing of the Liberation Movement, Father Leonardo Boff, had the bad luck of going to Russia not too long before the fall and coming back a Latin American praising it as an example of socialism. So, they were very fuzzy about socialism. I think, however, you'll find today that if you read seriously in liberation theology, they've gotten away from most of that. The emphasis, now, is on democracy. There's more emphasis, I think, on working with organizations like the trade union movement, cooperatives, etcetera, and much less of theoretical talk about capitalism versus socialism. But it's quite understandable to me why Latin Americans don't like capitalism.

Q: It has exploited them.

HIGGINS: Because it has a bad name. I remember being in Brazil one time, over ten years ago now, with a group of Americans, and among other people, we visited the auxiliary bishop in the section of Sao Paulo where the automobile industry is centered. A very nice young man and a very strong defender of the trade union movement in Brazil. He used to open his cathedral for their meetings, etcetera. But in one of our meetings, he went into a long, I won't say diatribe, but a long criticism of the American trade union movement. It was tied in with capitalism. And I said, “Bishop, really, I hate to say this, but if I had the money, I would give it to you right now and bring you to Detroit and let you sit down with the people in the Auto Workers Union. I think you'll find out that you do not have anywhere in all of Latin America a union which is as aggressively pro-worker as the UAW is in the United States.” Q: It's not anti-capitalist.

HIGGINS: I said, “You are really talking theory.” And he was. He was very nice about it, but he had a theoretical concept. Since the American unions and the UAW specifically were working with capitalism, therefore they were pro-capitalist. Then I said, “Really, you don't have a union anywhere in all of Latin America that can even remotely compare

with the UAW in its devotion to the interest of the workers." And, they don't, of course. Latin Americans are great for theories, rhetoric and long speeches. I remember being at one meeting of CLAT, this confederation of former so-called Christian trade unions, where it would be common for them to speak for an hour and a half or two hours, flowing, theoretical. . . .

Q: Well, if you can't do anything, you like to speak about it.

HIGGINS: Well, its part of their culture, too. I remember being in Cuba, right after the revolution, before Castro really went over the hill and identified himself as a Communist. He spoke for seven hours, one night, on television. Seven hours! And nobody seemed to be surprised by it. I was traveling [at the time] with another priest. We turned it on in our hotel. We then went to have a drink with John Correll, who was the Labor Attach#, and it was on in his apartment. We went to dinner, and it was on in the restaurant. We came back to our hotel ,and it was still on. Seven hours. (Pause)

Q: Now, I would like to go over some of your reactions to the work and the relationships between the various unions in the countries you can speak about, and especially your reactions to the U.S. Government positions taken, the individuals involved, and what you think we should have done that the government didn't do in the labor field or whatever evaluations you wish to give.

HIGGINS: Well, my recollections are vague in that, and I didn't have that much exposure to any particular country. I'd be in and out a day at a time more on holiday than anything else. My general impression of that period is — We're speaking now of the early 1950s — that the labor attach#s were a superior group of people and extremely helpful to me. I always touched base with them when I'd go into France or wherever. They were extremely helpful. I must say, by contrast, my more recent experience is different, not that they are not helpful. I never met a labor attach# who wasn't helpful. But they don't seem to have the same feel for the labor problems that some of the earlier ones did. I don't even

remember the names of all of them that I dealt with. My overall impression is that that early original bunch of labor attach#s were competent and extremely helpful and on the whole, I thought, fair. I never had any problems with any of them showing any prejudice one way or the other. Now I don't travel as much as I used to, but in the last ten years, I've met some labor attach#s here and there who I thought could have been commercial attach#s. They could have been anything. They were nice people. They would go out of their way to make appointments for me and the usual courtesies that a government officials gives, but I didn't feel they had the. . .

Q: "Fingertip feeling" for the union movement.

HIGGINS: Feel for the labor movements, yes.

Q: But without making excuses for the government, the problem is they have to cut back on personnel and, therefore, they generally get people who can operate in other areas. What do you think is the relevance of a trade union background in determining who should be assigned as a labor attach#? Is it good or bad?

HIGGINS: Well, I speak as an outsider. I think it's essential. If he is going to relate intelligently to other trade unionists, it seems to me it would be very helpful, if not essential, to have some background or some experience — a common language, a common understanding of the situation. That's not to say that the exceptional person couldn't come along who could do it just as well or better without that background.

I've thought about it often in connection with quite another subject, and that's on the reporting of labor and the reporting of religion. I deal with both of those subjects. I find many reporters totally unprepared for the assignment — totally unprepared. I've been at labor conventions where you can't find the press table any more, there are so few of them around, and they obviously don't have any great background. I've dealt with a number of reporters on religious matters where their ignorance was just appalling. Now there are many reasons for that. Newspapers have limited staff and limited money and so forth. But

it's just appalling at times. They ask questions that anybody could find out [answers] by looking [them up] in an ordinary encyclopedia or handbook. So, on your question, my own feeling is that it's very essential to have somebody with some labor background.

Q: How do you react to a comment made occasionally that a trade union background can b— and it sometimes is — so important to a person that he begins taking sides within the trade union?

HIGGINS: Yes. Well, let me modify what I said. I don't mean necessarily that they had to be a trade unionist but someone with a knowledge of the trade union movement. Many of the labor attach#s were not trade unionists, but they had some feel for the subject. in the sense that Louis Stark did as a reporter. He was not a trade unionist, but he understood the trade union movement. That's what I mean. I didn't mean that he had to come from the trade union movement, because for the reason you just gave, that could lead him into a political. . .

Q: It could, but not necessarily.

HIGGINS: Not necessarily. But that's what I meant, not that he come from the trade union movement, but that he have some feel for it.

Q: Well, we are running into that difficulty, now.

HIGGINS: It seems to me it would be something like sending somebody to cover the Vatican and he had no knowledge of the Catholic religion, no background. You know what's going to happen.

In the first session of Vatican II, — I don't remember his name now, I'm sorry to say. — the best reporter, in my opinion, and there were many reporters there, was a Jewish reporter from The New York Times. He took a year off before he came to Rome, to prepare for that.

Q: That's The New York Times, which gave him a year off.

HIGGINS: Well, yes. I forget his name now, but he was always a splendid reporter. He died after the first session. A splendid reporter. But it was obvious, he knew what he was doing, while some of the others were just hit and miss or picking up gossip. He had made a serious study of what the issues were. His questions at the press conferences were always right on target. That's what I meant by saying the labor attach# should have that kind of understanding, [i.e.] some knowledge of the history of the movement.

Q: I was involved in training labor attach#s for service abroad, beginning with some of the early ones, and later on, at one point we had them in training for a year, like you said The New York Times did. Now it's down to a six week summer's course, and they're trying to cut back. Do you have any suggestions as to what sort of training labor attach#s should get?

HIGGINS: Well, I'm speaking off the top of my head, because I know nothing about it. I would say they should be immersed in as much as you can be in labor history, so they have some context in which to understand labor. [This should include] not only American labor history but the labor history of the countries to which they might be sent, and general European and Latin American labor history. Otherwise, they are flying blind it seems to me.I think that's one of the real problems in our own culture in the United States. So few people have any knowledge of labor history, but they have strong opinions, of course.

Q: That's right.

HIGGINS: They know nothing about the history.

Q: We have included, even within a six-week training period, the concept of having an assignment with a trade union just to see how it operates at the local level. Unfortunately, we've had to cut that down considerably. I felt it was important. My successors, who are teaching it now, feel it's important. What do you think? Some people who opposed it said,

“Well, you know, they're not going to go into an American trade union. They're going to go into a foreign one.”

HIGGINS: But still, they need some feel for how a union operates. The other subject, but it's much more difficult to do and especially with limited time, is some, for lack of a better word, I'll call it “cultural anthropology.” [Labor attach#s need to] know something about cultures which are different from our own, because that's going to affect the trade union movement. It is quite understandable to me why there's a different attitude towards trade unions in Latin America than there is in Chicago. Those are totally different cultures. As I said earlier in another context, one of the objections that I heard when I first went to Europe on the part of some Europeans was that Americans were so narrow in their own understanding of trade unionism that they couldn't conceive of anything being different and couldn't understand why anyone would even think of having a separate trade union movement from the mainstream movement.

Q: I know you claim your knowledge is very superficial, but to the extent that you're willing to comment, what about the American trade unionists who operated abroad? Brown, Lovestone, Reuther, etcetera? Any observations?

HIGGINS: Well, I have observations, but they are superficial. I never had any direct contact with Brown, Lovestone, or Reuther in the international field. I knew them of course. I met them. I was always somewhat bewildered by the utter secrecy of Jay [Lovestone]. That I didn't understand at all. I had no personal dealings on labor matters in Europe, or anywhere else with either Lovestone or Brown or Vic Reuther. I said I was bewildered by the secrecy that always surrounded Jay [Lovestone]. I used to meet him occasionally at labor conventions. I had no idea what he was up to really except by hearsay. Brown, I knew in general what he was doing, but not in detail. And Victor, I had no contact with him on international affairs. I don't want to be unfair to Victor, but I sometimes had the impression that they had Victor in Europe to get him out of Detroit, but I don't know whether that's true or not.

Q: Did you have anything to do with the UAW, by the way, before you went on the [UAW internal disputes] review board?

HIGGINS: Oh, yes. Not officially, but I had many, many contacts. I have been at every UAW convention for fifty years. So, I knew them at that level personally. That's why they asked me to go on the board, I assume, because I knew them.

Q: Well, as for the international activities to the American unions, the secrecy of [some of] their operations was, of course, because some of the funds that they were using were, according to revelations later on, American Government funds coming from the CIA.

HIGGINS: Yes. Well, I always suspected that, but Jay, I think, was by temperament conspiratorially secret.

Q: It's his whole history in the communist movement.

HIGGINS: He would have done that, even if he wasn't taking money from them.

Q: Yes, that's true. Did you get any feeling as to the effectiveness of those international operations, at all?

HIGGINS: No, I didn't. Not in any direct way. What I hear and read and that would be all, you know.

Q: Italy?

HIGGINS: Well, Italy. My original dealings were with Tom Lane, and he was as mysterious as Jay Lovestone, the Delphic Oracle, you know. You never quite knew what Tom was saying. I liked him very much. As a matter of fact, I preached at his funeral many, many years ago now. He was a good personal friend, but I never really was sure what Tom was doing. He had that curious way of talking, where he kind of talked in symbols and he used his hands a lot. I had no real personal experience with what he was doing in the internal

trade union [situation in Italy]. I knew he was a strong defender of Pastore, and talked about him a great deal, but I never had much personal contact with him. But I always thought it difficult to find out what Tom was really saying. There was a certain mystery about it.

I remember two Italian priests, who later became bishops, came to the United States after the Vatican Council. I had known them in the Council. So, I thought, well, as long as they're in Washington, — They were both interested in social matters. — I'll take them down to see Tom in the Labor Department. It was an utter waste of time. Tom spoke half Italian, half English, and mostly with his hands. They didn't know what he was talking about. It was the curious manner that he had. But he was a good friend.

Q: Do you have any comments to make on the decision of the U.S. Government and the decision of the U.S. trade union movement to support Pastore, and not to cooperate with the socialist-oriented UIL at that time? It was a decision which the American government people, Lane and Bruce Millen, had different views on.

HIGGINS: Yes. I just assumed, without knowing anything about it, that it was part of the Cold War atmosphere. Everything fitted into that one heading, but I wasn't involved in it, and I wasn't greatly surprised. We were supporting anything that was anti-Communist and they figured Pastore, I suppose, would be more reliable. But I don't know. I met the UIL people and the Pastore people, but didn't know them well.

Going back to an earlier period, I will tell you a story about Dubinsky.

Q: Oh, yes.

HIGGINS: Maybe I've told you before. I ran into him in a hotel lobby in Rome. He was smoking a huge cigar. He said, “You should have been with me this morning, Father.” I said, “Where were you this morning?” He said, “I had an audience with the Pope.” This would have been Pius the XII, in the anti-Communist period. “Well,” I said, “there are two

reasons I could never get an audience with the Pope. I'm not Jewish and I'm not a labor leader." But I said, "Since you had an audience, what did you talk about?" He said, "I said, 'Holy Father, you did a great job in those elections.'"

Q: He was a fascinating person, Dubinsky. I think I may have mentioned to you that I had lunch, the other day, with Mazur and Gus Tyler, who is writing a history of the ILGWU. (International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union) They both agreed to be interviewed.

HIGGINS: Good.

Q: Okay, any other countries in which you had observations about the work of the government? Frankly, with respect to Italy, there were two sides within the government; one of which was not quite as concentrated on the Pastore situation.

HIGGINS: I never got that involved in any of the countries actually. What I would do is, if I went to Paris, for example, I would find out who was the Labor Attach# and would go over and see him, have a drink with him, or a cup of coffee, and find out what I could learn.

Q: What about Asia? Any comments? Did you go there, at all? The Catholics, as you know, are very active.

HIGGINS: In more recent years, I've been to Asia but not at that time.

Q: Well, don't restrict it to the old times. What about — I don't know the names of the fellows in Korea and Japan. Did you have anything to do with them? Some of them are doing remarkable work.

HIGGINS: I don't recall whether I met the Labor Attach#s in Korea and Japan.

Q: Oh, I'm talking about the priests operating there.

HIGGINS: Oh, I know some of the priests. Sure.

Q: In educational work.

HIGGINS: Oh, yes. I know a number of the priests. The one that I correspond with most frequently is in Taiwan. Do you remember when the four Jesuits were killed down in Salvador?

Q: Oh, yes.

HIGGINS: The brother of one of those men is in charge of the Rerum Novarum Institute in Taiwan, Jose Ellacuria, a Jesuit from the Basque country, like his brother. The Rerum Novarum Institute is an educational institute for workers pushing as far as they can go for free trade unions. About three years ago, Father Ellacuria was expelled from the country. He finally got back in. But another priest, an Irish priest not of his order, who was more vocal, I guess, and more polemical, they kicked him out for good. They called him into the headquarters of the police. He brought two of his lay assistants with him and they waited outside, and when he didn't come out after an hour or so, they got worried and they called the bishop. The bishop checked, and he had never even sat down. They took him out the back door, put him on an airplane, and sent him to London. He never got back in. Ellacuria is back in. I suppose he was told to cool it a bit. A good man. Just quietly trying to educate workers towards free trade unions.

I knew some men in Korea, a Maryknoll priests and Colombians who worked with the workers.

Q: Is that Ballou or is that Japan?

HIGGINS: No, that one, I don't know. In Hong Kong, I knew some.

Q: Generally, they do educational work.

HIGGINS: Yes.

Q: And to the extent that that stresses democracy and trade unionism and things like that, they run into problems.

HIGGINS: Well, they do educational work directly for workers too. I spoke in Korea, this is ten years ago now, in all of the Catholic seminaries. At that time there were four and they were crowded with vocations coming out their ears. At one of them, I remember the rector of the seminary, who spoke English reasonably well, said when we were going into the meeting, “Father, you might as well take it for granted that there will be somebody here tonight spying on you. But,” he said, “Don't let that worry you. We live under that system.”

Q: How do you react to the allegations made, and I'll come to India, shortly, the allegations made that the Catholic educational institutions are there to proselytize for the religion rather than the state?

HIGGINS: In Korea?

Q: No. No. [I shall come to the subject of] India shortly. That is the accusation made [in India]. Do you have any feeling about that?

HIGGINS: Well, I've never been to India, so I haven't any idea what the situation there is.

Q: No, I mean: Is there the allegation in any of the countries that you have been in about proselytizing as against simply educating about labor?

HIGGINS: Oh, you mean in the labor schools and in the labor education program?

Q: Yes.

HIGGINS: No, I never heard that. I don't believe it of the people I know. I think they were in there because they believed the workers ought to have free trade unions. I think that's a

suspicion that people might have, but I never saw it. I might add, it's a very dangerous way of proselytizing. Very dangerous.

Q: That was the allegation in India. The government was very uncomfortable with the wonderful activities [going on there].

HIGGINS: Well, you knew these men; I didn't.

Q: Oh, yes. I knew them very well and saw no evidence of proselytizing except that, for the untouchable group and for the nativist (tribal) groups, it was a self-defense device to become a Catholic, if they chose to do so, but I saw no evidence of that, because by becoming a Catholic, you then were forgiven by society for having been. . .

HIGGINS: Yes, I can see that. Well, I must say that in all the time I've been in this field, for the men that I know who were working with workers, that charge would not be true either in this country or in overseas.

Q: By the way, I have a strong feeling that that's not true in India either; and we defended them against those charges because many of them were Americans, whose status would have been in question.

HIGGINS: Yes.

Q: But there was always the problem every time. Imagine a man spending thirty years at the Xavier Institute and then he has to get new papers to stay on and then there's always the charge, somebody in your class claims. . . .

HIGGINS: They can kick you out.

Q: Yes, and there is the danger of being kicked out. And that is their whole life.

HIGGINS: One of the Maryknollers, who was not in labor education in Korea, told me an interesting story. He was, I think, attached to the bishop's office. He said, “I got so tired of having my phone tapped and having these people come around and interrogate me, that I thought I'd take them on. So,” he said, “one day the usual agent came by and he wanted to check on me. And I said to him, 'You know, Mr. Kuhn or King, we've been meeting now for two or three years. You keep coming in here, but I don't think you know where I come from. So, if you'll just sit back, I'm going to give you a history of my church.' “ So, he said, “I took him from Moses. By the time,” he said, “I got up to the Middle Ages, he was so tired, he wanted to stop. But, 'Oh, no, no,' I said, 'I'm just getting started.' “ He said that was the last time that guy ever bothered him.

Q: Well, do you have any final words? We're coming close to your next appointment?

HIGGINS: No, I must apologize for my memory being so vague. The problem is that I really didn't have that much direct involvement. My trips to Europe were rather haphazard and my contacts intermittent. It wasn't as though I were studying France or studying Italy or studying Holland. I have impressions. That's all. But I have very favorable impressions of the Labor Attach# Corps in those days, very favorable.

Q: Good. Well, thank you very much.

HIGGINS: I thought [the Labor Attach# Corps] was an extremely important innovation, and not only are the Americans, I knew a number of labor attach#s from other countries, whom I used to meet around town.

Q: They have a few here, now. Well, thanks, very much. It will take me a little time to clear up.

HIGGINS: Sure. I'm going away all next week to the annual Christian-Jewish dialogue in Tulsa.

Q: Representing which group?

HIGGINS: I represent myself. No, I'm really, in this case, I'll be representing the U.S. Catholic Conference. I'm the Chairman of their Advisory Committee on that subject. And then, I'm going to Philadelphia for a labor meeting and I'm going to Rome for a week, for a very interesting meeting [with] thirty people from around the world on the Church and workers. What the agenda is, I don't know.

Q: Now, that is a subject which, in the old days, we would have our Labor Attach# cover in some way. Now a days, with all the division of work of the Labor Attach#, they cannot afford to do that. Well, thank you very, very much. We'll transcribe this as soon as we can and give it to you. Well, you'll also be asked to signed a release, so that the transcript can be used.

HIGGINS: No problem.

Q: Thank you very much.

End of interview